

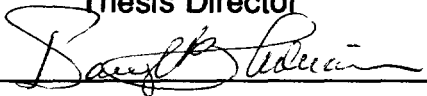
**Film Adaptation of Literature:
The Medium and Its Message**

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely reading "Daryl B. Adrian", is written over a horizontal line.

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Film adaptation of literature is not a sin. Slaughter of a literary work through adaptation is also not an act punishable by god, although critics often take on this role with lavish excitement. However, when addressing the topic of film adaptation of the novel, short story, or play, one encounters a plethora of material that reflects the attitudes, negative and positive, of both the film and literary worlds at this process of sharing media and minds. It is hard to imagine that these two fields, though similar in creative process, would be so critical and unkind to one another, constantly pointing to the differences between them.

Some say "movies evoke an emotional response, while books create intellectual responses" (Harrington 271). Some say "we are the artists;" others say "we are art!" These arguments, however, can be proven untrue by poor works existent in both media. The failures of film need not be pointed out any more than the failures of literature, for each failure also can be a process of growth for that art. As well, success of future films and novels often forces the failures to be forgotten. We also need not be disturbed by the success of some films that seem hollow and formulaic, for romance novels, too, thrive in our society. What needs to be explored are the differing viewpoints about film adaptations and what makes artists in both fields feel so strongly about one another. By understanding both perspectives, we then can see why every medium has its message, unique to itself, no matter from where the original inspiration comes.

From the beginning of film, a beginning that some still remember, writers had an opinion about film. The images that Aldous Huxley viewed in the film

Jazz Singer, he regarded “with a fascinated horror”(Geduld 70). The earliest perceptions of what film could, would, or should portray ranged from this initial horror to the “great possibilities as a medium of art” seen by Theodore Dreiser (Geduld 206). One opinion was formed early: film is not literature. However, critics were not as quick to say “literature is not film.” This opinion would take many failures of adaptations and vicious attacks by critics before it would be solidly formed. As these silent adaptations were attempted, and the idea that literature is not film was formed, there developed a new haze over the lines between these media– the sound picture. While the new technology of film tried desperately to be defined on its own, its developments made it appear more like theater and, therefore, literature.

Film had not the chance to define itself separate from literature before competition had been set up, possibly to the ill effect of both media. Although “the verbal and visual modes are fated to eternal hostility,” according to W. R. Robinson (Harrington 271), he sees the potential and freedom that cinema entails when he writes the following:

Performing its rhythmic dance to energy’s tune, the movie of the imagination proves, should there be any doubt, that cinema, an art of light, contributes more than any art today to fleshing out the possibilities for good within an imaginative universe (275).

Although Robinson predicted a great future for film, playwright George Bernard Shaw felt very differently about this new media. Shaw felt that “the huge polynational audience makes mediocrity compulsory” (Geduld 118). He especially felt this about adaptations, projecting that the development of cinema must come from cinema, not from the periphery art of literature (Geduld 120). Interestingly enough, Shaw claimed he would never let them adapt his plays. however, when he said this in 1925, movies were not yet developed with sound

technology, thus generating also this response: "I repeat that a play with the words left out is a play spoiled...It shall not happen to mine" (Geduld 122). Of course, Shaw did adapt his plays; his *Pygmalion* on film earned him an academy award for best screenplay.

Shaw seemed to have made a successful marriage to the screen, but at what price? He changed the ending of the original version of *Pygmalion* to please the audience, then Hollywood changed the ending again to develop *My Fair Lady*. Assuredly, Shaw was right when he proclaimed in 1925 that "all our music consists of permeations and combinations of twelve notes, all our fiction consists of variations on a few plots" (Geduld 119). His successful plot has been repeated several times over. The most recent "adaptation" came last summer with *Pretty Woman*, a movie using the Hollywood tradition where the girl received "the fairytale" ending. Naturally, it was a huge success for Hollywood, but would probably return Shaw to his original comment that "it is in the words that the widest power of variation lies" (Geduld 119).

The writers are not the only ones who have a problem with accepting adaptations. A recognized formalist theorist, Béla Balázs, forms the idea that adaptations are a good idea, because each media has strengths that the other does not, thereby allowing color to form on the screen where words developed them on the pages (Harrington 6ff). Another theorist, André Bazin, points out that some novelists "simply serve to supply the filmmaker with characters and adventures largely independent of the literary framework" (Harrington 13). He goes on to criticize the theater as a "false friend" because it appears to be like cinema, but lures the movies in the wrong direction in their evolution (Harrington 14). Directors like Alfred Hitchcock claim "the nearest art form to the motion picture is...the short story. It's the only form where you ask the audience to sit

down and read it in one sitting" (Harrington 117). Whether it be a complete rejection , or a limited exception, the filmmakers have opinions about adapting literature that are as varied and biased as those that the literary writers hold.

One idea that many people related to the cinema hold is that filmmakers have the liberty to take the original work and reinterpret it. Balázs makes the statement that "nearly every artistically serious and intelligent adaptation is such a re-interpretation" (Harrington. 11). These interpretations, however, can follow the work religiously or alter it beyond recognition. Bazin reminds us that this is also the case in translating Italian sonnets into English, or old Italian tales into Shakespearian plays, when he says the following:

One might suggest that in the realm of Language and style cinematic creation is in direct ratio to fidelity. For the same reasons that render a word-by-word translation worthless and a too free translation a matter for condemnation, a good adaptation should result in a restoration of the essence of the letter and the spirit (Harrington 20).

When Bazin criticizes the theater, he criticizes those directors who would adapt a play simply by filming it. This form of adaptation captures the words and set of the play but cannot create the feeling that the audience would have in being at a live performance, thereby making the adaptation unfaithful and unspirited. In this process, direct interpretation generally fails in accomplishing its cinematic goal and purpose.

The other extreme is the adaptation that borrows little but the story and the characters. Some of these films create monsters from deep, searching, and sympathetic characters, making these monsters appear nothing like they did in their literature wombs. Two money- making literary monsters are *Frankenstein* and *The Hunchback of Notré Dame*. In the endless number of adaptations that have come out of these books, little of the passion and struggles experienced

by the characters is found. All that we experience is the fear that these monsters create, or an altered form of sympathy. But, it cannot be denied that these movies create icons for future generations to populate their nightmares. Of course, these cinema adaptations reveal little understanding of the message or the essence of the novels. The cinema audience sees none of the passion felt by the monster Frankenstein, who is made out to be a simple and childlike pet. Nor do we feel the control affixed over the hunchback by his indebtedness to the evil priest. Hollywood opted for the easy monster movie based on fear of these physical monsters, rather than attempt to portray the relationships between these creatures and their more monstrous father figures. Balázs explains that some literary writers choose the novel rather than the play to express these more complex relationships, since they are "loath to let all the wealth of mood and detail go to waste" (Harrington 11). However, hiding in the novel does not protect the stories or the characters from the hunger of Hollywood's attempts at adapting.

It is obvious that films adapting literature have the initial problem of deciding on a point of view for the movie. Joseph M. Boggs writes an entire chapter on the problems created when adapting a film, and even takes time to explain why some points of view are impossible to translate directly into film. He explains early in his analysis that "the first person point of view has no true cinematic equivalent" (Boggs 324). Whether his observation is true or not, films do have the ability to translate different points of view into cinema, thereby capturing the essence and spirit of the novel without a direct translation. An excellent example of this process is the film *Apocalypse Now*, a film based on the Joseph Conrad short story, *Heart of Darkness*. Although *Apocalypse* is not in any way a direct translation of the original, it manages to capture the essence

of the original while creating new messages of its own. Voice-over narration, accompanied by an obvious focus on one character, lends us a feeling of a first person point of view, the point of view also used by Conrad for his story. Although the setting and circumstances surrounding the characters are altered, the main message of the seduction of power is revealed. The changes that are made thus do not destroy the story that Conrad wrote about the destructive force of the British Empire. Instead, the changes dramatized the comparison of the United States with British Empire, which uses its power to better its own position, with little concern for the lands or people it destroys. The changes in the movie are not intended to be disrespectful to the story; instead, these changes are designed to be a tribute to the original. As Bazin explains, "if an author wants to pour into a film the colours of life which are barred by the severe style of the drama, he does so not because he does not respect the style of the various art forms, but because he respects them absolutely"(Harrington 12). Point of view of a story therefore does not have to limit the filmmaker, despite Boggs' insistence on the limited potential of some stories.

What seems to be more of a problem is the reluctance of many filmmakers to attempt to portray some of the points of view generally deemed impossible to present. Film, like literature, thus often is trapped by the traditions it creates for itself. As the novel changes the face of writing, so should a creative director change cinema through new methods of presenting the story on film. Such is the case with D.W. Griffith, now recognized as one of the great auteurs of film. According to another prominent film critique and director, Sergei Eisenstein, Griffith encountered opposition as he tried to develop his form of montage. For example, when Griffith suggested showing one scene, then quickly cutting to a parallel scene, his producers exclaimed "How can you tell a

story jumping about like that? People won't know what it's about." Griffith responded with "Well, doesn't Dickens write that way?" (124) Despite the argument that "that's novel writing; that's different," Griffith finally won and permanently established himself in the history of cinema development.

If a director finds a new way of presenting stream of conscious writing, that director should be congratulated for that success, not restrained in the old traditions. Boggs, in his text on the history of films, is correct in drawing some conclusions about yesterday, claiming that though some film styles are no longer used, the cinema writer should be cautious about defining tomorrow's style. There is a language in image, and the semiologists, although probably trying too hard to force this idea, have something in their idea about the strength of this image language(Andrew, p.223).

There can be no doubt about the influence that novels had on the early filmmakers. After all, the filmmakers were coming out of a literary society. The question is, are today's filmmakers *pure* in the sense that they are unaffected by an outside medium? If the case is that filmmakers are not influenced by literature, then film may be both blessed and cursed—blessed in that no longer will we have to worry about bad adaptations of cherished classics and cursed in that our society may be turning from its greatest source for new thought and creativity. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a text on the development of media and its ill effects on society, Neil Postman predicts a Huxleyan society where the "people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act...culture-death is a clear possibility"(Postman 156). If our films are developed only from old films, if our society puts the book aside for the easier method of eye-fed knowledge, then we are at risk of losing the complimentary benefits of those combined cultures, leaving us with only the flat surface and

empty art of light. Enhancement of one another can occur, for what brings new perspectives to old legends more beautifully than the cinema, and what well is fuller of ideas left unexplored than the bulk of literature created over the last 400 years.

Joseph M. Boggs, in his chapter on adaptations, writes:

"One of the most difficult problems of film analysis arises when we see a film adaptation of a play we have seen or a novel we have read, for we generally approach such films with completely unreasonable expectations" (330).

Well said, but does he really mean *only* those films in which we have read the book first? Many films are made from obscure books or plays, and these adaptations receive little rejection from the audience. Both the movie and the novel or play can satisfy the expectations of, or enlighten, the viewer to ideas and dimensions not entirely understood from the initial reading. However, it is also true that our imagination sometimes can create the perfect sunset, the perfect man, or the perfect hell-- a perfection unequal to anything someone else could create for us on screen.

Boggs therefore is entirely incorrect when he says the following:

It is often advantageous to see the film before reading the novel, for the film may provide a great aid to our visual imagination, and we may then read the novel with relatively clear-cut ideas of how the characters look and sound (p.334).

This kind of process indeed illustrates the death of culture that Huxley speaks of, when movies become the creator of the images that literature strives to create in our minds.

Until recently, film could only capture reality. If film reality is what we use to visualize the created worlds in our books, then how do we improve our reality? The obvious exceptions to this are the recent developments in computer generated graphics and special effects, which free the movies to create

realities. The actors, however, and what they bring to the roles they perform should compliment the characters created in our minds from first reading the story, least our imaginations become the victims of a Huxleyan warning.

The point many critics and writers seem to miss is that the medium makes the message. Even though Postman understands this concept, he falls short when he condemns television and film, confining them only within the realm of entertainment. Balázs comes close to saying that the medium makes the message, but he also limits the idea by confining certain messages to certain media. That one medium is superior in potential to the other should never be the debate. In fact, any message can be made available through any medium-- if there is someone who has the creativity and cleverness to form a message in that chosen medium. It is not the medium, or the raw materials, that limits the success of adaptations; instead, it is the artists own creativity and imagination that renders a successful creation. Cinema, as well as literature, has only the potential that the human imagination and mind gives it-- whether in finding a way of adapting a novel totally from the first person point of view, or in developing a new technology that allows for more reality in cinema. All forms of adaptation and creativity are valid as long as the final creation can be called art.

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